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Karin Lipson

An Angry Voice From Vietnam

By Karin Lipson
STAFF WRITER

ANGER WAS WHAT Brooklyn artist Dinh Le felt when he read, some months ago, about the stepped-up U.S. campaign to uncover evidence of American servicemen still missing from the Vietnam War.

The U.S. position was clear: If Vietnam hopes for improved relations with its one-time enemy, it must seek to account for the 2,264 American servicemen whose *fate* remains unknown.

And Hanoi, eager to end a crippling U.S. economic embargo against Vietnam, was opening its files, and its country, to the American search for the missing.

But to the Vietnamese-born Dinh Le (pronounced *Dean Lay*), something was terribly wrong. "The U.S. is still acting like it's all the Vietnamese government's responsibility — like *they* are the ones that did all the bad things," the 24-year-old Le said recently. "I want to remind people of what the U.S. did, most of all about Agent Orange and how many people were killed."

So Le, who uses existing photographs and computerized images in his art, created a project about the war-caused devastation that still plagues his native land.

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> —Dinh Le

Sponsored by Creative Time, a New York organization that supports the work of emerging artists, Le designed a hard-hitting postcard and poster to be distributed to thousands of individuals and groups across the country. Heading Le's mailing list are such figures as President George Bush, President-elect Bill Clinton and Massachusetts Sen. John Kerry and his fellow members of the Senate Select Committee on POW-MIA Affairs.

What they will be seeing is far from conventionally beautiful. The work features two photographs, one of them a controversial image of three Caucasian men in a forest setting, holding a sign that bears the date "1990"; some have interpreted the picture as evidence that American POWS are still alive in Indochina, while others have debunked it as a fake. The second photograph, this one undeniably real, shows three Vietnamese children with horribly deformed limbs. Wedged between the two photos, in capital letters, is a one-word question: "ACCOUNTABILITY?"

Shouldn't the United States be held accountable, the poster goes on to ask, for the use of 18 million gallons of Agent Orange; 15.5 million tons of bombs and munitions; the creation of 300,000 Vietnamese orphans, and other destructive actions? (The cited sources for the statistics are the Indochina Newsletter and Earth Island Journal.)

To Dinh Le, these figures — not unsubstantiated live sightings of missing servicemen — are the facts of the war, but "the (MIA) issue is such an emotional one that nobody dares to challenge it on a factual level," the artist said. As Le explained his views recently, they seemed to run counter to public sentiment, at a time when the long-smoldering issue of POW / MIA's had caught fire with both the public and political figures. But events in recent days have moved swiftly: The Senate POW / MIA Committee has berated several POW fund-raising groups for using false claims of live POWs to raise millions of dollars. And unofficial diplomatic sources reported yesterday that U.S. investigations of live sightings of missing servicemen have ended, without result.

Whether or not his views are universally popular, it's certain that Le, a former refugee, comes by them honestly.

As a young child in Hatien, 200 miles south of Saigon, he saw the shredded body of his grandmother, who had stepped on a land mine. In

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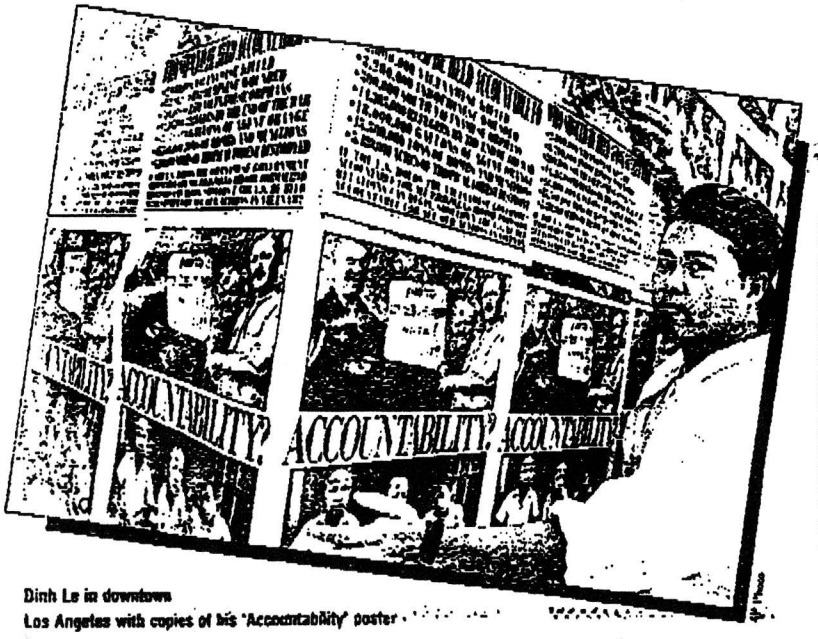

Dinh Le in downtown Los Angeles with copies of his "Accountability" poster

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1979, his family's escape from Vietnam was partly thwarted by authorities, who lobbed grenades and shot at the fleeing family members. Eleven-year-old Le, his mother and three siblings made it to a boat that took them to a refugee camp in Thailand; two older brothers and a sister were scattered in the gunfire.

Remarkably, they were all eventually reunited in Simi Valley, Calif. But Le describes his growing-up years there as unhappy. "It was a very alienating environment," he recalled. "I was a loner, partly because I didn't speak any English." His speech retains a slight accent and some inconsistencies in grammar, harking back to those days.

At college in Santa Barbara, "I didn't really want to deal with anything about the war at all," he said. "I kind of want to let it go and start over."

But such war movies as "Platoon" and the "Rambo" films "start to get me really upset," he recalled. Where was the acknowledgement of American war policies that created such pain for the Vietnamese?

And a college course that offered a parade of American Vietnam-War veterans as guest speakers but only one Vietnamese convinced him that, to Americans, "it doesn't matter what the feeling of the Vietnamese is."

So he began making art that expressed his feelings about the war, some of which (including the "Accountability" project) is in a current exhibition featuring seven Vietnamese-American artists. (Organized by the Bronx Council on the Arts, "Here and Now, Now and Then" is at the Longwood Arts Gallery in the Bronx through Dec. 19. Tel: (212) 931-9500.)

The "Accountability" project has begotten a personal mission for Dinh Le, sending him cross-country to hand-deliver his poster and postcard to various art centers and friends. Though he wants his work to prod America into a less "arrogant" stance toward the Vietnamese, he hopes that the MIA negotiations with Hanoi will soon lead to formalized relations between the two.

"Part of me still very much loves Vietnam," he said. "And to have this rancor between the two countries is not a very comfortable idea — that my past and my present have to be disconnected. I kind of want to have both of that together." / ■